

[A Lesson in Wood-Lore]

Beliefs & Customs - Folk Stuff

FOLKLORE

NEW YORK Forms to be Filled out for Each Interview 9

FORM A Circumstances of Interview

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER Wayne Walden

ADDRESS 51 Bank St. New York City

DATE January 5, 1939

SUBJECT A LESSON IN WOOD-LORE

1. Date and time of interview December 28, 1938
2. Place of interview 53 Bank St. New York City
3. Name and address of informant Miss Lena Fusco 53 Bank St. New York City.
4. Name and address of person, if any, who put you in touch with informant.
5. Name and address of person, if any, accompanying you
6. Description of room, house, surroundings, etc.

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NEW YORK

FORM B Personal History of Informant

STATE NEW YORK

NAME OF WORKER WAYNE WALDEN

ADDRESS 51 Bank St. New York City

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SUBJECT A LESSON IN WOOD-LORE.

1. Ancestry Miss Lena Fusco, 53 Bank St. N. Y. C. is about 40 years old and has been a counselor at certain settlement house camps. The present tale is related of Madison House Camp.

2. Place and date of birth Miss Fusco is American born, but, as the name indicates, is of Italian parentage. She attended for a time the labor college of Katonah, N. Y. She is at present a housewife.

3. Family

4. Places lived in, with dates

5. Education, with dates

6. Occupations and accomplishments, with dates

7. Special skills and interests

8. Community and religious activities

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9. Description of informant

10. Other Points gained in interview

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FORM C Text of Interview (Unedited)

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SUBJECT A LESSON IN WOOD-LORE

The talk, as it was bandied about by one and another sitting around the restaurant table, was not of a particularly high order. But we talked of many things. Cabbages, I think, were not dwelt upon, but there was mention of kings, at least dictators, and the inevitability of much that might, after all, fail to occur. It was fairly well agreed, as I remember, that the history of the next world war will never be written, for the simple reason that no one will be left to write it. "And it'll be just as well", said a misanthrope among us, "for the damned human race ain't fit to survive anyway."

Had the indictment been less sweeping, it probably would have been more provocative of some fitting retort. None of us seemed inclined, however to champion the whole of the human race. But the somewhat banal remark, "The more I see of human beings, the more

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I like dogs"! with which the tirade ended, was a bit too much for a lady who until now had not been loquacious.

That catchphrase, slightly irritating to the group itself, was the cue to which my informant responded. If she did not speak poignards and every word a stab, her opening remarks were at least as fraught with wisdom as anything the misanthrope had said. Probably, too, they tended to restore a dim sense of our individual importance to the rest of us. "I like dogs", she began, "I like them as well as any normal person might be expected to like dogs. But, contrary to certain 2 abnormal opinions, I like humans better. Particularly human beings whom circumstances, or hereditary qualities, have not reduced to the level of [dogsm?] fawning [abject?] creatures grateful for a bone, or inclined to snarl and bite as their dominant trait."

The possibly malicious thrust was not lost upon him whose pronounced aversions to his fellow-men had evoked the lady's utterance. He bristled slightly, but was gentleman enough not to interrupt the impassioned speech. After a moment's pause she resumed, but now with less asperity.

"I think that a human is more than a dog, even though the average of us are a composite of animal, angel and devil. An animal is often likable; ans angel is supposed to be lovable; and even the devil must be given his due. But its kids, I think who are on the whole potentially superior to dogs. Kids are kids, of course; they're often barbarians, even little savages; but some of them grow into the full stature of real human beings, while the dog forever remains but a dog, and certainly will never become a great philosopher, a scientist, nor even a musician — no matter how hard he tries sometimes to sing. The ululations of some socalled members of the human tribe are, I'll have to admit, no more dulcit than the howling of dogs."

It was a matter of conjecture just what this last remark might have implied. Evidently she didn't allude to the misanthrope, and as the rest of us had carefully refrained from emitting

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any ululations during the lady's discourse, we naturally thought that she must have meant the landlord or, perhaps, the racous voiced newsboys hurrying by with an "uxtra". It isn't certain how much longer the monologue, dogs vs. humans, might have lasted had not "Slangy Slim" out in causing it to strike off at something of a tangent. Slim invariably grows restless when the conversation is high-brow, on topics which a guy has got to be an intellectual to savvy the stuff. Slim has long followed the trade of house painter, that is when he can find an employer not overly finical as to the quantity and quality of his work. Then, too, Slim was once something of Bard having composed a piece that 3 appeared in no less a periodical than the Hobo News. Thereafter Slim's business and calling cards bore testimony to his being a "Post and House-Painter." Slim's heroes were about the only persons he took seriously; and they were contemporaries of the American Bison. Whether they were actual historical characters, or but fictional, is of no particular importance to Slim. From Kit Karson to King Brady, they were great guys.

"Maybe you're right" Slim addressed the speaker, "near as I can see through what you been sayin', but these city kids, these little Wop kids and Jew kids and all the other little Orangutangs runnin' round the streets — has your gapings of them convinced you that there's many Danial Boones among them? Like among our four fathers?"

"Indeed no", laughingly replied Miss Fusco, "I must say that I have not in my 'gapings' of these east side boys encountered many Danial Boones. The style, I'm afraid, is now somewhat outmoded. Dense forests have pretty well disappeared from New York City's streets, as you will see, if you'll use your 'gapers', and grape-vines along with them."

"The scenes from the time of Danny Boone have shifted, but there is yet an effort to acquaint the kids with woodlore, to know something of the nature of what small birds and animals and plant life that still remains. My experience is that the brats react to the instruction as typically native born kids, which they are, whether 'Wop', 'Kike', 'Mick', or 'Merican.' As a counselor in a camp nearby New York, where these east side boys and girls are brought in big batches ever summer to sojourn among natural surroundings,

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I have dealt with hundreds of them, and 'gaping' at their behaviour, as well as their misbehaviour, I find that their pranks are boyish rather than to be described as Jewish, Woppish, Irish or any other ish. Even Indianish", the speaker added, as an afterthought, to a rather long sentence.

"At the camp, at least once a week, we devote an evening to woodcraft and to hearing from the kids their reports of whatever animal, bird or plant, may have been noticed in their rambles, and of which they profess a thirst for knowledge. We gather round a camp-fire as a council of Indian scouts — the kids, of course, are the 'scouts', and a more mature person, generally a teacher, or head counselor, acts the part of the 'chief'.

"Often these councils, as they are intended to be, are not only enjoyable, but educational as well. We generally derive something from them, but as happens in the best of all human arrangements, they sometimes become farcical, when the scouts are feeling more frivolous than decorous. On one such occasion the Chief, who happened to be unusually solemn lady, seriously desirous that sense rather than nonsense should rule the deliberations of the assembly, had 'Pebbles' and 'Stumpy' to put up with. They were both little devils, and always cutting up some sort of monkeyshine. Pebbles nickname was because his real name was Littlestone. Anyway, our sagacious Chief, elevated upon a comfortable, vineclad stump, cushioned with soft and glossy green leaves, sat through the session giving oracular advise, and listening to the reports of the little eastside Redskins. Many of the queries asked by the noisy young Indians, if at all serious, would be respectfully answered by the Chief. Too much levity she didn't like, and would bawl out the kids when they tried to get just too funny.

As some of us expected, it wasn't long before Pebbles had a say in it. Rising from the midst of the other scouts, squatting in a semi-circle in front of the austere Chief, his face as impenetrable as a real Indian's, Pebbles began his stuff. Probably he had prepared it with the help of other of the braves, and had rehearsed it before an audience of the little devils. 'Oh Chief,' he began; as me and Stumpy was comin' up the road today, we seen a boid

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what was knockin' on wood. Stumpy asked me what kind of a boid was that and I told him it was a woodpecker an' that it always knocks on wood. So Stumpy kinda got scared and puts on his hat.'

Whatever the Chief might have replied to this was lost in the boos and loud laughter of the boys, with the giggling accompaniment of the girls. But the look the Chief bestowed upon Pebbles would have shriveled the soul of a less dauntless scout. But Pebbles was a perserving Redskin, and he made a sign for the rest of the kids to be silent. Again he arose and, beginning with the customary 'Oh Chief', says, in reference to another feathered creature, likely of his own imagination, 'Oh Chief could you tell us guys what kind of a boid this was-it wasn't a canary, cause a canary is little and yellow; it wasn't a robin cause it didn't sing like a robin; it wasn't a chickenhawk an' it wasn't a eagle either, but we thought maybe you could tell what it was. The last we seen of it was when it flew on to the limb of a pickled-herring tree—

By now the agrieved Chief could stand no more. 'That will do', she said, 'these council meetings are not for the purpose of showing off as clowns. This is not a circus. It is with an idea of teaching you children some useful information on nature and woodcraft, that we hold these camp-fire gatherings, and if you don't come here prepared to play your part as you are supposed to, you may stay away. 'That, for the time being at least, finished Pebbles and his ilk.

But it was an innocent little girl who precipitated an end to the evening's session. The sweet little thing had been noticing all along that the Chief sat among the pretty vines. 'Oh Chief' said that dear little scout,' what does poisen ivy look like, and does it hurt when you set on it?' 'Poison Ivy' answered the wise Chief, 'is a shiney leafed plant, which at this time of year should be carefully avoided. Contact with it is most likely to result in trouble, blisters at least, and sometimes serious illness.'

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'Oh Chief', responded the well instructed little girl, 'ain't you a settin' in poisen ivy right now?'

“As this appalling fact struck the horrified Chief her guise of solemnity and chieftain dignity evaporated as suddenly as it took the leaping lady to clear out from that comfortable stump. The Chief, herself, had learned a lesson in woodcraft, and for the rest of the season scrutinised where she sat.”